



Report
of
Congressman Mel Watt (12th District – NC)
on
The First Seven Months of the 110th Congress

Dear Constituents:

In the first seven months of the 110th (2007 - 08) Congress, the House of Representatives has passed important legislation aimed at addressing the priorities of the American people. I am happy to issue this Report on some of that legislation and where it now stands in the process. I am also happy to report that, while some of the legislation is still being considered by the Senate and has not yet become law, significant progress is being made to change the direction of public policy and our nation in a number of different areas. I hope this Report will help you evaluate that progress and that it will help inform you and make you better able to provide the kind of input and advice that is so necessary for me to be able to represent your views effectively.

If you would like more information about any of the legislation described in this Report, please contact my office. And, of course, I welcome your advice and input on this legislation as well as other federal matters on which we can provide assistance.

Sincerely,

THE 110th CONGRESS AT WORK

Statistics on the First Eight Months Of the 110th (2007) Congress

	107th Congress (January – July 30, 2001)	108th Congress (January – July 30, 2003)	109th Congress (January – July 30, 2005)	110th Congress (January – July 30, 2007)
Roll Call Votes	296	459	453	762
Bills Passed	107	173	136	221
Days in Session	83	86	87	106

**All numbers from the House Office of the Clerk*

DEFENDING OUR COUNTRY: We all take very seriously our obligation to *maintain our national security, defend our country and protect our homeland. The very first bill passed by the House in 2007, a bill to implement the recommendations of the 9/11 Commission, was recently signed into law by the President. As we continue to push for a responsible redeployment of U.S. troops from Iraq, we must continue to support our troops and we must ensure the best health care possible for them and our veterans.*

- **9/11 Commission Recommendations:** The very first bill that passed this House, H.R. 1, will make Americans safer by implementing the recommendations of the 9/11 Commission. Many of these bipartisan recommendations, which were sent to Congress in 2004, were not acted on in the last term of Congress. President Bush recently signed this legislation into law.
- **Iraq Supplemental Spending Bill:** President Bush requested a spending bill with “no strings attached”. But this legislation provides for a new direction in Iraq by tying economic aid to 18 benchmarks on political, security and economic progress. The first report required by this bill was released on July 15 and, unfortunately, indicated that little or no progress was being made on most of the benchmarks we set.
- **Iraq Resolution:** Expressed support for the troops and opposition to the President’s escalation of the war in Iraq.
- **National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2008:** Makes military readiness a top priority so our nation can be better prepared to face threats and challenges of today and tomorrow and focuses on improving health care, benefits and pay for our troops.
- **Defense Appropriations:** Provides funding to do the things authorized in the National Defense Authorization Act so we can honor our commitments to our troops and their families and prepare our forces to meet future needs. This funding will address equipment shortfalls, ensure our troops and their families better pay, health care and housing and support plans to increase the size of the Army and Marine Corps.
- **Homeland Security Appropriations:** Will provide first responders training and equipment, increase security for air travelers by providing funds for explosive detection systems at airports and doubling the amount of cargo screened on passenger aircraft, increase transit security on trains and ferries and increase port security.
- **Military Construction and Veterans Affairs Appropriations:** Will make the largest investment in the Department of Veterans Affairs in the Department’s history. This funding will enable the VA to provide much better health care for our veterans, although there will continue to be more that needs to be done.
- **State and Foreign Operations Appropriations:** Will continue efforts to stop the genocide in Darfur, Sudan by directing funds to address the crisis there and will make significant investments in global health efforts.
- **National Security Foreign Investment Reform and Strengthened Transparency (FIRST) Act:** Will strengthen national security by implementing changes to the review process for foreign investments in the United States in response to the Dubai ports scandal.

- **Intelligence Authorization for Fiscal Year 2008:** Will authorize the largest amount of funding in history for 16 U.S. intelligence agencies and intelligence-related activities of the U.S. government.
- **Wounded Warrior Assistance Act of 2007:** In response to reported and documented problems at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, the Hefner VA Medical Center in the 12th District of North Carolina and at other medical centers around the country, this bill includes measures to ensure that our troops and veterans receive better medical care and treatment.
- **Memorial Day Veterans Package:** A total of seven bills to expand veterans' pay, health care and benefits, including measures related to compensation for veterans with service-connected disabilities, compensation in certain cases for impairment of vision involving both eyes, traumatic brain injuries and rehabilitation and direction to the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to develop and implement a comprehensive program designed to reduce the incidence of suicide among veterans.

DOMESTIC PRIORITIES AND COMPETITIVENESS: *The House has passed a number of bills to improve the lives of everyday Americans and help to ensure that people have a fairer shot at the American Dream. That, of course, continues to be a very high priority for me. Some of these bills are described below.*

ECONOMY/WORKER FAIRNESS

- **Minimum Wage:** By a wide margin, Congress passed the first increase in the minimum wage in almost a decade, raising the minimum wage from \$5.15 an hour to \$7.25 over a 26 month period. The President signed the bill and the first phase of the increase (increasing the minimum wage to \$5.85) went into effect on July 24.
- **The Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act of 2007:** Will rectify the Supreme Court decision, *Ledbetter vs. Goodyear*, in which the Court changed a longstanding interpretation of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act in a way that will require employees to start legal actions in many cases even before they are likely to become aware that they have been discriminated against.
- **Public Safety Employer-Employee Cooperation Act:** Will give public safety officers the right to collectively bargain over wages, hours and working conditions, with safeguards to insure that the public is not harmed.
- **The 21st Century Competitiveness Act:** Will strengthen America's competitiveness in today's global economy by supporting young researchers, increasing the number of qualified math and science teachers through education scholarships and increasing investments in the National Science Foundation and the National Institutes of Standards and Technology.
- **Employee Free Choice Act:** Will establish greater balance between management and labor by providing workers an opportunity to join a union without pressure or interference from management.
- **Shareholder Vote on Executive Compensation Act:** In response to the increasing disparity in pay between executives and workers, this bill would ensure that shareholders are able to cast an advisory vote on their company's executive compensation practices.

- **Taxpayer Protection Act:** Will increase IRS outreach to provide taxpayers with stronger protections from identity theft and tax fraud.
- **Small Business Tax Relief:** Provides some tax relief for businesses most impacted by the increase in the minimum wage.
- **Small Business Fairness in Contracting Act:** Requires steps to create a more open federal contracting system so that all businesses, including small businesses, have a fairer chance to win federal contracts.
- **Small Business Lending Improvements Act of 2007:** Will make capital more accessible for small businesses.

EDUCATION

- **The College Cost Reduction Act:** Would authorize the largest single investment in college aid since the 1944 GI Bill. This bill will make college more affordable for millions of students by increasing the maximum Pell Grant and cutting interest rates on student loans in half over the next five years, while cutting the federal deficit by a projected \$750 million by reducing subsidies to private lenders.
- **Student Loan Sunshine Act:** Will help clean up the relationships between student lenders and colleges in response to a serious scandal.
- **Improving Head Start Act of 2007:** Will provide 10,000 more children with access to Head Start services.

HEALTH CARE

- **Children's Health and Medicare Protection Act:** Would expand the State Children's Health Insurance Program to cover 5 million children who are eligible for the program but are not yet enrolled, bringing the total number of children covered to over 11 million. The bill would also strengthen Medicare by allowing seniors to continue to see doctors of their choice and by eliminating co-payments and deductibles for seniors for preventative care. The President has threatened to veto this bill.
- **Stem Cell Research:** The House voted to expand federal funding for life-saving embryonic stem cell research, a position supported by two-thirds of Americans. However, the President vetoed this bill and there are not sufficient votes in the House or Senate to override the President's veto.
- **Negotiation of Prescription Prices:** Would require the Secretary of Health and Human Services to negotiate lower prescription drug costs, reversing the prohibition contained in current law.
- **Trauma Care Systems Planning and Development Act of 2007:** Would authorize grants to improve access to and development of trauma care systems.
- **Stroke Treatment and Ongoing Prevention Act:** Would strengthen stroke education, prevention and treatment programs.

- **National Breast and Cervical Cancer Early Detection Program Reauthorization Act of 2007:** Amends the Public Health Service Act to authorize grants for preventive health measures relating to breast and cervical cancers.
- **The Food and Drug Administration Revitalization Act:** Would enact the most sweeping drug safety provisions in years and create a new FDA program to monitor the safety of drugs after they are on the market.
- **Living Kidney Organ Donation Act:** Would streamline and speed up the kidney donation process.

PUBLIC SAFETY

- **Community Oriented Policing Service (COPS) Improvements Act of 2007:** Would authorize 50,000 additional police officers over the next six years and provide funds for COPS technology grants and for hiring community prosecutors.
- **Local Law Enforcement Hate Crimes Prevention Act of 2007:** Would provide state and local law enforcement more resources to prevent and prosecute hate crimes and close the gaps in federal law to help combat hate crimes committed against persons because of their race, color, religion, national origin, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity or disability.
- **National Instant Criminal Background Check Improvement Act:** Would improve the accuracy of criminal background checks under the 1968 Gun Control Act and prohibit individuals who have been adjudicated mentally ill from possessing a firearm.

KATRINA RECOVERY

- **Relief for Entrepreneurs: Coordination of Objectives and Values for Effective Recovery (RECOVER) Act:** Authorizes grants to help small businesses on the Gulf Coast and requires the Small Business Administration to develop a written disaster response plan.
- **Katrina Housing Tax Relief Act of 2007:** Will modify and streamline legislation passed in 2005 to encourage and ease rebuilding of housing in the Gulf region.
- **Gulf Coast Hurricane Housing Recovery Act of 2007:** Will provide more flexibility and funding for housing to help those who need housing assistance get it more quickly.

APPROPRIATIONS

The House has approved all 12 appropriations bills required to fund the federal government's operations for fiscal year 2008, which starts October 1, 2007. This puts Congress in a position for the first time in years to pass and send all 12 bills to the President before the next fiscal year starts. These bills include, in addition to the appropriations bills described in other parts of this Report, the

- **Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education Appropriations;**
- **Commerce, Justice, Science Appropriations;**
- **Transportation, Housing and Urban Development Appropriations;**
- **Financial Services Appropriations; and**
- **Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration Appropriations.**

OTHER IMPORTANT BILLS

- **Farm Bill:** Would substantially increase investments in nutrition, conservation, renewable energy and rural development and would substantially reduce taxpayer subsidies to wealthy farm interests and redirect assistance to those who need it most.
- **District of Columbia House Voting Rights Act:** Would give the residents of the District of Columbia a voting representative in the House of Representatives after more than 200 years.
- **Deceptive Practices and Voter Intimidation Prevention Act:** Would help combat a growing number of efforts to deceive or intimidate voters to keep them away from the polls by making voter deception a federal crime and increasing the penalties for voter intimidation.
- **Federal Housing Finance Reform Act:** Will reform oversight of Fannie Mae, Freddie Mac and the Federal Home Loan Banks and create a new fund to promote affordable housing.
- **Methamphetamine Remediation Research Act of 2007:** Would authorize critical funding to help law enforcement locate and shut down meth labs and support research to determine the best way to clean up old labs and eliminate chemicals that can harm our environment and health.

PROTECTING THE ENVIRONMENT AND ACHIEVING ENERGY INDEPENDENCE:

There seems to be a growing commitment to promoting clean air and water, addressing global warming and moving toward energy independence. That commitment is long overdue. The House has now established a Select Committee on Energy Independence and Global Warming to help inform Congress and the public and to help develop policy initiatives in these areas. House Committees have conducted dozens of hearings on these issues and the House has already passed a number of bills that reflect the growing commitment. Some of those bills are described below.

ENVIRONMENT

- **Water Resources Development Act:** Authorizes the Army Corps of Engineers to conduct water resources studies and undertake projects for flood control, inland navigation, shoreline protection and environmental restoration.
- **Water Quality Financing Act:** Reauthorizes the Clean Water State Revolving Fund, the primary source of federal funding for clean water, to help states and local communities build and improve wastewater treatment facilities.
- **Healthy Communities Water Supply Act:** Will help increase the usable water supply by encouraging innovation in water reclamation, reuse and conservation.
- **Water Quality Investment Act:** Will aid cities and states in preventing dangerous sewer overflows that pose public health hazards and impair the environment.

ENERGY

- **Energy Independence Act:** Will promote the use of homegrown renewable fuels and the production of vehicles that run on them, support cutting-edge research and the development of new technologies that would help reduce energy costs and help create new jobs.
- **The Creating Long-Term Energy Alternatives for the Nation (CLEAN) Energy Act:** Would roll back \$14 billion in taxpayer subsidies for oil companies and increase investment in renewable energy.
- **Energy and Water Appropriations:** Appropriates funds to provide vital research into climate change and energy efficiency and make investments in renewable energy programs.
- **Interior and Environment Appropriations:** Will increase investment in important research to help make our nation energy independent and combat global warming and increase investment in clean air and water programs.
- **Federal Price Gouging Prevention Act:** Will help combat price gouging by committing federal resources to investigation and punishment of those who artificially inflate the price of gasoline.
- **No Oil Producing and Exporting Cartels Act (NOPEC):** Would authorize the Justice Department to take legal action against OPEC state-controlled entities that participate in conspiracies to fix the price of oil.
- **Advanced Fuels Infrastructure Research and Development Act:** Would encourage research and development of markets for biofuels.
- **Energy Technology Transfer Act:** Would authorize funding for centers to demonstrate the commercial application of advanced energy technologies.

CHANGING THE WAY BUSINESS IS DONE: *High profile cases of corruption and the perception of unethical conduct have made it necessary for the House to pay much more attention to fiscal responsibility and transparency and to lobbying and ethics reform. We are making much needed progress.*

FISCAL RESPONSIBILITY

- **PAYGO:** The House restored pay-as-you-go (“PAYGO”) budget rules that require identification of offsets and/or revenues before spending can be approved and prohibits deficit spending. PAYGO rules resulted in surpluses in the 1990’s, but were allowed to expire in 2002.
- **Concurrent Resolution on the Budget for FY08:** Created a budget blueprint consistent with the reinstated PAYGO rules.

ETHICS

- **House Rules:** The House adopted, as one of its first orders of business, stringent new House ethics rules and required earmarks in appropriations bills to be more transparent.

- **Honest Leadership, Open Government Act:** Requires new transparency for fundraising and political campaign activity by lobbyists, greater transparency in earmarks and in the legislative process, bans gifts and privately funded travel from lobbyists, restricts corporate flights, strengthens restrictions on members of Congress and their senior staffers leaving public service to lobby and expands public disclosure of lobbyist activities.
- **Accountability in Contracting Act:** Would limit how long no-bid contracts can last, require agencies to minimize the use of no-bid contracts and direct agencies to justify any such contracts awarded.
- **Whistleblower Protection Enhancement Act of 2007:** Will give whistleblower protections to federal employees and employees of federal contractors who specialize in national security issues.
- **Presidential Library Donation Reform Act of 2007:** Would require the disclosure of donors to presidential libraries.
- **Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) Amendments of 2007:** Would strengthen the provisions of FOIA and increase public access to government information.

CONGRESSIONAL OVERSIGHT: *A major shortcoming of Congress in recent years has been the failure to do effective oversight of the President's office and of departments and agencies of the executive branch of government. When Congress appropriates money but fails to monitor how it is spent, ask questions, investigate allegations of impropriety and perform its oversight responsibilities the executive branch of government can become wasteful or out of control and the balance of power between the legislative and executive branches of government can be compromised. So far this year, Committees and Subcommittees of the House have conducted 578 Oversight hearings into such important topics as:*

- **Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Global War on Terror;**
- **Veterans – Walter Reed Army Medical Center scandal, poor conditions at VA Hospitals, etc.;**
- **Student Loan Scandal;**
- **Global Climate Change;**
- **Firings of U.S. Attorneys; and**
- **Hurricane Katrina Response.**

Some important legislation has resulted from these efforts, including:

- **The U.S. Troop Readiness, Veterans' Health and Iraq Accountability Act;**
- **The Wounded Warrior Assistance Act;**
- **The Student Loan Sunshine Act;**
- **The Gulf Coast Hurricane Housing Recovery Act; and**
- **The Katrina Housing Tax Relief Act.**

Oversight by Congress has also resulted in ongoing investigations into the firing of U.S. Attorneys as well as much greater scrutiny of what is happening in Iraq and in every agency and department of the federal government.